

Vanilla

anything but bland

Move over saffron. Vanilla is fast becoming the most expensive spice in the world.

It's no wonder it's pricey. Vines take up to four years to mature, the flowers require frantic hand-pollination during its flowers' one-day bloom and, once picked, the pods require months of curing. If that wasn't enough, a perfect storm of crop failure, climate change, skyrocketing market demand and theft have forced prices to triple in the last year alone.

Despite all this, vanilla is worth its spot in your kitchen at almost any price.

But beware of imposters. With the cost of real vanilla being so high, many manufacturers are keeping prices down by using artificial flavourings, such as vanillin, which is actually a product of the pulp and paper industry.

Other signs the vanilla isn't pure include phrases such as "vanilla flavour" and the very confusing "pure vanilla flavour." To be sure you're getting real vanilla, read the ingredient list. Avoid anything with vanillin, glycerin, and/or water.

Vanilla extract: Pure vanilla extract may or may not contain sugar but will always contain vanilla beans and alcohol. When you buy extract, look for a label that says "pure vanilla extract" but does not contain the word "flavour."

Whole beans: Whole vanilla beans are long, thin and leathery. They will come in a sealed glass tube to preserve freshness. The beans should be supple, not brittle. If they



Charmian Christie

break when bent, use them for vanilla sugar (page 91).

To get all the vanilla goodness from a whole bean, split it lengthwise with a knife and scrape out the tiny seeds – aptly called vanilla caviar – that give vanilla custards and ice cream the distinctive black flecks.

Beguiling as the caviar is, the flavour is mainly in the pod, which is why many recipes call for steeping the split pod in cream or other liquids before being used in the recipe. Once the liquid has steeped, don't toss the pods. They still carry flavour and can find new life in vanilla sugar.

Vanilla bean paste: Once available only in specialty shops, vanilla bean paste is now making its way into supermarket shelves. This dark brown paste usually comes in a stubby dark bottle. It's bursting with vanilla seeds and delivers wonderful vanilla flavour without scraping out caviar or steeping the pod. You can use it in place of vanilla extract or beans.

Don't have the right type of bean? Don't worry. You can always substitute:

1 whole vanilla bean = 1 tablespoon (15 mL) vanilla extract = 1 tablespoon (15 mL) vanilla bean paste



VANILLA VARIETIES

While "vanilla" might be used to dismiss something as dull or bland, there's actually no such thing as plain old vanilla. Depending on where the bean is grown and how it's processed, vanilla delivers distinct flavour variations, much like wine or coffee. While there are at least half a dozen different vanillas grown around the world, three are commonly found in our supermarkets and specialty shops. See which one suits your palate:

Tahitian: Light, fruity and floral, the almost cherry-like Tahitian vanilla goes well with fruit dishes. Susceptible to heat damage, it's best in cold or frozen dishes.

Madagascar / Madagascar

Bourbon: Named for the Bourbon Islands, not the whiskey, this vanilla is the most common variety on the shelves. It's extremely versatile and has a woody undertone. Use in either hot or cold dishes.

Mexican: Vanilla originated in Mexico and this variety remains my favourite. While it's straightforward, clean and well-balanced, Mexican vanilla has a tiny hint of spice and a depth not found in Tahitian or Madagascar varieties. It works well in spiced dishes, either hot or cold.

Regardless of what type of vanilla you buy, keep it in a cool, dry place, away from sunlight.



CLASSIC VANILLA CRÈME BRÛLÉE

I can pass by Crème Caramel without so much as a second glance. But Crème Brûlée? It reels me in every time. Is it the crunchy crystalized sugar topping or the silk custard? I'm not sure. Clearly more research is needed.

Makes 4 servings

- 1** vanilla bean
- 1 1/2** cups (375 ml) whipping cream
- 6** large egg yolks
- 1/4** cup (60 mL) granulated sugar, plus more for caramelizing

Preheat oven to 300°F (150°C).

1. Split the vanilla bean lengthwise. With the tip of a knife, scrape the seeds (vanilla caviar) into a two-cup measuring cup.

2. Add the cream, egg yolks, and sugar to the vanilla caviar and whisk until well combined. Pour the cream mixture evenly into four ramekins*.

3. Place the ramekins into a shallow roasting pan or casserole dish. Pour hot water into pan until it comes halfway up the sides of the ramekins.

4. Bake until the custard barely moves when ramekins are jiggled, or a knife inserted in centre of custard comes out clean, about 45 to 60 minutes.

5. Remove the ramekins from the water bath and let cool to room temperature. Cover and refrigerate for at least four hours or overnight

6. Just before serving, sprinkle each ramekin with 1/2 tablespoon (8 ml) granulated sugar, covering the custard completely. Turn the ramekin upside down and tap lightly to remove excess sugar. Turn upright. Caramelize the sugar with a kitchen torch or by placing the ramekin under the broiler for a minute. Let sugar cool five minutes before serving.

• *If you don't have ramekins, use one-half cup (125 ml) mason jars.*



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VANILLA PALMIERS

These are not the breadly imposters found in many North American bakeries. Simple, flaky, sweet and buttery, these are like the shattery treats sold at tiny patisseries that line cobblestone streets. One bite and you'll think you're in Paris.

Makes 24

¾ cup (175 mL) vanilla sugar*

1 roll commercial puff pastry, defrosted
4 ounces (125 g) semi-sweet chocolate, optional

1. Sprinkle the work surface with half the sugar. Place a disk of puff pastry on the sugar. Sprinkle with more sugar. Pressing the sugar into the dough, roll until you have an 8-by-12-inch (20-by-30-cm) rectangle.

2. Trim the dough so that the edges are even. Fold the long sides of the pastry rectangle toward the centre leaving one-half inch (1 cm) between where the folded edges would meet. This gap is crucial for the palmiers to keep their shape when cooking.

3. Fold the dough in half along this gap. You will now have a roll four layers thick and about two inches (5 cm) wide and 12 inches (30 cm) long.

4. Flatten the dough gently with the palms of your hands. Wrap the dough in plastic and refrigerate for one to two hours. Scrape the sugar off the work surface and save with the rest of the sugar for dipping later.

5. About 30 minutes before you are ready to bake the palmiers, preheat the oven to 375°F (190°C). Line a baking sheet or two with parchment paper.

6. With a sharp knife, cut the dough crosswise 1/2-inch (1 cm) thick. Dip both cut sides in sugar and place cut side down in the parchment.

7. Be sure to leave at least two inches (5 cm) between palmiers. They will expand quite a bit sideways. They don't expand much top to bottom, so you might be able to get six rows of four if your sheet is big enough.

8. Bake 15 to 20 minutes or until the palmiers are amber and the sugar has caramelized. Allow the palmiers to cool a few minutes before transferring to a wire rack to cool fully.

9. Optional chocolate dip: Melt the chocolate in the microwave oven in 30-second bursts or in a heat-proof bowl over hot, not boiling, water, stirring gently until smooth. Tilting the bowl to pool the melted chocolate, dip half of a palmier into the chocolate, then place on parchment paper or waxed paper to set.

*VANILLA SUGAR

Vanilla sugar is where steeped and scraped pods go to die. You can make as much as you want with this ratio. Use it in place of granulated sugar in baked goods to boost the flavour. It also makes a lovely addition to tea and coffee. The best part? You never waste a scrap of vanilla again.

1 vanilla bean (whole or with the caviar removed and steeped)

2 cups granulated sugar

1. Split the vanilla bean lengthwise. Place the bean pieces in a jar with a tight-fitting lid.

2. Pour the sugar over the bean pieces, tighten the lid, and give it a shake or two to distribute the sugar and bury the beans.

3. Place in a cool, dry place for a week before using. Once infused, vanilla sugar keeps indefinitely. Replenish any time you use a vanilla pod. You cannot add too many pods. As the sugar gets low, top it up.

4. Just keep baking with vanilla, and you'll never run out of vanilla sugar. If it clumps, grate the sugar on the large holes of a box grater to break apart. 



Making Stocks

(Makes approx 4L (prep time 15-60 min; cook time 90min to 4hrs))

Ingredients

- 2kg Beef/Veal Bones (available at Stemmler's)
- 1 ½ Cups Onion (chopped)
- 1 Cup Celery (chopped)
- ¾ Cup Carrots (peeled & chopped)
- 5 Garlic Cloves (whole)
- 5 Sprigs Fresh Thyme
- 5 Sprigs Fresh Parsley
- 2 Bay Leaves
- 10 Whole Peppercorns
- 6L Cold Water

Instructions:

1. There are many ways to make stocks; with meat, strictly vegetarian, light, dark. I like a darker stock myself, however, it will depend on the application you are using it for. If you need stock to make a light or white sauce (veloute) or soup, use a light stock. If you intend to make a darker sauce, jus or soup, then obviously, make a dark stock. The difference of these are very simple; for the darker stock just roast the bones (if using) and the vegetables (called mirepoix) to caramelize everything before adding it all to the pot. For the lighter stock, do not roast and just start it as is.

2. When starting the light stock, gather all the ingredients together in a large pot. Add the cold water. You may need to top it up a bit more to make sure the items are completely covered. Place the pot on a burner and set at high temp. Keep watch that it does not boil. As soon as it gets to a very low simmer, turn it down and leave it there. As the stock starts to cook, you will see a scum start to form on top of the water. Those are the impurities in the bones and veg rising to the top. Simply take a ladle and slowly skim the top, removing the scum but not the liquid. Place into bowl to discard later.

3. Every 20 minutes to half hour, check the liquid to make sure that it's still at a very low simmer (small bubbles around the outside of the pot only). This also allows you to keep removing the impurities as they collect on the surface. As you keep doing this, you will be able to skim the grease that will start to form on the surface as well. Keep skimming through the whole cooking process. You may need to add more water from time to time to keep everything completely submerged. **** NOTE: never boil or stir your stock. Because the impurities rise to the top, it will ultimately clarify the stock and bring it to a nice clear liquid. Any agitation will make the final result very cloudy or murky looking.****

4. For the dark stock, as mentioned, lay the bones and the vegetables on a baking sheet and place in a 400F oven for 20-30 minutes. You can then follow Step 2 & 3 again.

5. For a vegetable stock, you can just omit the bones and follow the same steps. You only need to cook for about 90 minutes.

6. Once the stocks are done (beef 6-8 hours, chicken/turkey 3-4 hours, vegetable 90 minutes), pour the liquid through a fine mesh strainer and then into another pot to cool down in a fridge or cold place. Once it's cooled, a small amount of grease may still rise to the top and harden. Simply remove that with a spoon and discard. The stock can then be poured into containers and stored. I keep mine refrigerated fresh for 4 days and frozen for 3 months.

7. Note that no salt has been added, so you will need to season it accordingly. Enjoy whatever you decide to create with these lovely stocks.

 CHEF SCOTTY est. 1985 For more information on Chef Scott Yates please visit : chefscottycooks.com

3031 Lobsinger Line Heidelberg Ontario, N0B 2M1 Tel: (519) 699-4590

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